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LOCAL NEWS

New life sought for old Abilene High School



Thomas Metthe/Reporter-News The former Lincoln Middle School building at South First Street opened as Abilene High School in 1924. It was constructed next to the railroad tracks and Bankhead Highway to make a statement to train passengers and highway travelers that the young town of Abilene was serious about education.

By *Titus Falodun* of the Abilene Reporter News

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The historic Lincoln Middle School campus remains a vacant property with a storied past but uncertain future.

The 7.8-acre school lot at 1699 S. First St. has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 2012, but has sat vacant since 2007.

Haskell native Robert Starr was a principal at Lincoln Middle School from 1986 to 1992 and he remembers it as a place with great athletics, arts, orchestra and band, something more than just a building.

"I was there six years as the principal and I enjoyed it very much," he said. "We had probably 700 students in there at that time. The faculty was just outstanding and the students were just good kiddos, too."

The school is comprised by the main building, the Eagle's Nest boys gym, the girls gym and a shop classroom.

Originally built in 1923, it became Abilene High School in 1924.

It became Lincoln Junior High School in 1955 and Lincoln Middle School in 1985 when freshmen were moved to high school campuses.

In 2007, the school closed as Craig Middle School opened.

According to Reporter-News archives, voters rejected a proposal to turn it into a career and technical high school in 2008 and the school district took bids on the property. Without any offers, the Abilene ISD transferred ownership to the city in November 2012.

The city is in charge of the preservation/security of the property and as of right now, there have been discussions on what to do with the property but nothing has been put down on paper, according to Cheryl Sawyers, city spokeswoman.

Sawyers said the city spends \$7,434 annually on the school's maintenance — \$3,596 on electricity, \$1,057 on gas and \$2,781 on water.

Last year, the city made security improvements including more

lighting and police patrols after incidents of vandalism and trespassing.

Police Chief Stan Standridge asked residents in November to assist the police's efforts to "safeguard it from illegal activity," by "reporting suspicious behavior and trespass issues that they may observe."

Lt. Gerald Moran, who oversees the APD street crimes division, said there were two reported incidents of "people coming in and out, tearing stuff up" in 2015, causing \$18,500 in damage.

But since then, Moran said, there have not been any reports of criminal mischief.

Sgt. Lynn Beard told the Reporter-News on Nov. 9, "We want to curb any further damage given the historical significance of the building. Lots of people in town have ties to the building as generations of citizens have been educated there."

Bill Minter, director of the Abilene Preservation League, sees a bright future for the now vacant building.

"It will probably be a multipurpose building, because you've got all these different components of it," he said. "You have this really great auditorium that would have several hundred seats in it. You've got a historic gym."

Minter, along with others, recommends things for the city to review but are not involved in the final decision-making process.

"Whatever I think, it will be is state of the art," he said. "It's a well-built building. There's a little bit of asbestos but if you compare it to other places (it's not that bad for buildings erected during that time)."

Minter added that there are reports of drainage issues occasionally.

Anita Lane-McBride, chairwoman of the Taylor County Historical Commission, said the school was built next to the railroad tracks and the main east-west road through town "to show the world how Abilene felt about education — that this was a civilized place to come."

The building remains valuable despite not being used because Lane-McBride said, "For many people in Abilene, it is Old Abilene High."

Lane-McBride, who taught at the rival junior high school Madison, is one of the people working to make sure Lincoln is more than a decaying block and memory.

"I think of it in the olden days," she said.

"I hate to see it fall in to disrepair because it should be a focal point for this community. I think because of its location and size, it should become a community center. It has an auditorium. It has a gym. It has classrooms. It has a cafeteria. All of those things. It can become a wonderful community center with lots of money."

Lane-McBride said it is going to take a lot of money to change the campus of Lincoln Middle School into something special again.

"And that's why it stands vacant today."

About Titus Falodun

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